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ABSTRACT

The contributions of Peter Stephen DuPonceau and John Pickering to American linguistics in the early nineteenth century are reviewed and discussed. Despite their probable status as amateurs in the study of American Indian languages and their very limited fieldwork, they made some significant contributions to the general field of language studies in their time and to the general intellectual climate of the era. Their most lasting impact on later generations of scholars appears to be through their analyses of American Indian languages, particularly in their efforts at language typology. Forty-eight references are listed. (MSE)

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"A CHAPTER IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF AMERICAN LINGUISTICS"

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"A Chapter in the Early History of American Linguistics"

by Stephen A. Guice - North Texas State University

This paper will look at the linguistic work of two of the most important figures in the early history of Linguistic work in the United States, Peter Stephen DuPonceau (1760-1844) and John Pickering (1777-1846). These two men were in many ways responsible for much of the growth of interest in the American Indian languages in the United States and were also very important in the dissemination of information on the Indian Languages in Europe. In particular much of the American Philosophical Society's original interest in the American Indian languages can be traced to DuPonceau's work with Thomas Jefferson in creating such an interest. Both men worked extensively in republishing earlier "lost" works on American Indian languages as well as generally discussing Indian languages and methods of studying them. DuPonceau was the first typologist to use the term "polysynthetic", and proposed that all of the Indian languages east of the Mississippi could be grouped into four "principal stocks" of languages (Algonquian (Lenape), Karalit (Eskimo), Iroquois, and Floridian (which he observed might be added to the Iroquois)). Pickering was instrumental in introducing the terms "inclusive" and "exclusive" for plurals, as well as describing dual plurals, and for proposing a uniform orthography for the Indian Languages, which was a first sort of rough attempt at some sort of IPA

system that would eliminate problems of deciphering field workers idiosyncratic transcription systems.

Their interests and work extended far beyond American Indian Languages, however. They both had an interest in general linguistic questions also. Pickering was a well-known classical scholar, whose Comprehensive Dictionary of the Greek Language was well received and who also wrote on the pronunciation of Greek, claiming that the pronunciation of Ancient Greek should be based on the pronunciation of Modern Greek. They both had an interest in the English spoken in the United States. DuPonceau wrote an Essay for the Prix Volney on the difference between written and spoken language, and later wrote on the Chinese writing system, and was the first to claim that the system was not ideographic, nor pictographic, but rather lexigraphic, that is to say, the individual words of the language are represented through individual characters. In addition, Pickering especially had a great interest in the educational system of the United States and in particular tried to expand the study of languages, for example trying to introduce the study of Modern Greek and Arabic.

Peter Stephen DuPonceau was born June 3, 1760, in France, and would have been an ecclesiastic, but left the Seminary and was in Paris working as Secretary to the Comte De Gébelin when Baron Steuben came through Paris in 1777 looking for a fluent speaker of English to accompany him as his secretary in his trip to the United States to join the

American Army. Taking that job he arrived in America in December of 1777 and remained with Steuben in the American Army for the duration of the Revolutionary War, becoming a naturalized citizen in 1781. After the war he worked briefly in the War and State Departments and then studied the law and worked in Philadelphia as a lawyer for the remainder of his career. He was a relatively early member of the American Philosophical Society, joining in 1791. He was Vice President of the APS from 1818-1828 and Corresponding Secretary of the APS in 1819 when he wrote his first work on American Indian languages (DuPonceau 1819). He later became the seventh President of the APS in 1828 and served as President until his death in 1844.

John Pickering's background is in many ways quite different. Born in 1777 in an old New England family, he was the son of a lawyer, Timothy Pickering, who served as a Colonel in the American Army, Quartermaster-General to the Army, and later as Secretary of War and Secretary of State. Due to the war and other circumstances John was separated from his parents through much of his education. He was quite fluent in a number of languages and was distinguished as a classical scholar at Harvard, where he graduated in 1796. From there he studied the law, with a four year interruption in which he served as Secretary to the U.S. Ambassadors to Portugal and Great Britain. For the rest of his career he worked as a lawyer, first in Salem and then in Boston. He also served in the State House of Representatives and

Senate. He also remained a very active, if outside participant in academic affairs, particularly at Harvard, where he served on the board of Overseers from 1818 to 1824. Harvard elected him Hancock Professor of Hebrew in 1806, and chair of Greek Literature in 1812, though he turned both offers down. The University of Pennsylvania also offered him the job of Provost, which he also declined. He was very active in the Massachusetts Historical Society, and served as the president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and he was the founder and first President of the American Oriental Society, serving as President until his death, as well as a member of the APS and other societies. He was also a "linguist" in the common sense of the word, in that he spoke a large number of languages and was familiar with an even greater number.

From this brief introduction of their lives it is clear that DuPonceau and Pickering represent an earlier generation of scholars of language whose professional lives were spent in other fields, in their cases the law, and who contributed to the general area of language studies in their spare time or retirement. In their generation there were very few opportunities for professional scholars of language, and many of the foremost scholars of language in that era worked in other careers. It is therefore clear that in some sense they represent "Gentleman scholars", a term that is now largely pejorative, and in one sense they were clearly amateurs.

Granting that they were amateurs in some sense, we should still recognize their achievements and not devalue their work and their very real contributions to linguistics in general and to the study of American Indian Languages in particular. Instead we should try to look at their accomplishments to see to what extent their work was followed up on by later, professional scholars, and to what extent their influence was felt, both in their own day, and in later times.

In most discussions of the History of American linguistics DuPonceau and Pickering are given a somewhat prominent mention * and they are generally recognized for their many contributions. But in many cases they are viewed as being outside the stream of American linguistics , or at least pre-dating it. Thus Kenny 1957 says DuPonceau and Pickering "deserve remembrance and praise for what they did to salvage and interpret the Indian languages, and for perceiving the correct familial relationships of the Algonquian family. [But]... Their linguistic ideas were rudimentary and naïve." (Kenny 1957, 204).

This is a major question that we must here address, what was the influence of DuPonceau and Pickering in their time, what influence did they have on the course of later work, and how should we judge their work?

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* For example; Campbell and Mithun 1979, Edgerton 1943, Earl Pliny Goddard 1914, Hoijer 1981, Koerner 1987, Stevens 1957, Wissler 1942, and Wolfart 1967.

To give a partial answer to some of these questions it seems clear that we must look at different areas of their work. In any such examination of a scholar's influence there are often certain areas of his or her interests that are followed up by later scholars, while other areas are ignored. It is clear that some of DuPonceau and Pickering's work was naïve, as Kenny and others have suggested, and some of it was quite insightful. What is, I propose, of greater interest to us is the question of how much effect their work had. We can certainly find the work of isolated geniuses very interesting. It is amusing and enlightening to see that some early scholar discovered some fact which was ignored at his time and overlooked for years, but was later on discovered and proved by someone else. We can all marvel at the insight of that researcher, but we are only involved in a sort of hero-discovery.

I would propose that what is of greater interest to scholars of linguistic historiography is the general pattern of linguistic history and the effect that certain scholars have had on the general state of linguistics, either in their lifetime or not. It is in this sense that we can perhaps divide the work of DuPonceau and Pickering in one major way, the work which, however clever or naïve, was either important and had an influence on the state of Linguistics at their time or later, and that work which was ignored or unnoticed.

To get a clearer understanding of this, we can divide the work of DuPonceau and Pickering according to their major areas of interest and look first at their work in the study of American English, at Pickering's work in Greek, then at their work in more general linguistics, and finally at their work in the American Indian languages.

The first work published by both DuPonceau and Pickering dealt with English. Pickering published a Memoir on the present state of the English language in America and a Vocabulary of American English in 1815 and 1816. These works were essentially prescriptive in nature, and were written with the understanding that a different dialect of English was spoken in the United States and that "so many corruptions have crept into our English, as to have become the subject of much animadversion and regret with the learned of Great Britain." (Pickering 1815, 441-442, italics his). He does seem to have an understanding of the fact that such dialect differences are perhaps unavoidable and are not the result of any radical design on the part of anyone in the U.S., and further that such dialect differences would grow in the future to the point where mutual intelligibility would be threatened. He also notes the fact that there is much less diversity of dialects in the U.S. than in England, and that the U.S. shows a much greater propensity to adopt new forms. There was a good deal of discussion of these works of Pickering at his time, with Noah Webster responding in a 60 page pamphlet unfavorable to Pickering and much

correspondence to Pickering in regards to the Vocabulary, both in the U.S and in Great Britain *. As far as any long-term influence, this work of Pickering's seems to have had little effect, which should not be too surprising, since in good part it is largely a collection of vocabulary and is not theoretically based. But this work does fit into a very important general area of research by language scholars in the 19th Century U.S.up to and including Whitney.

In 1818 DuPonceau published his first work, an essay entitled "English Phonology" which he first read to the APS in May of 1817. The full title of this work is "English Phonology; or, An Essay towards an Analysis and Description of the component sounds of the English Language". He explains that by Phonology he means "in general the knowledge of the sounds produced by the human voice." (DuPonceau 1818, 228). His purpose is to develop an "alphabet of sounds ... which the learned at least, might understand, and which might be made use of to convey to the mind through the eye, a tolerable idea of the pronunciation of idioms yet unknown, and to represent the sounds of languages foreign to each other in a manner more fixed and determinate than has hitherto been done ..." (DuPonceau 1818, 231). He says that such a universal alphabet could not exactly represent all of the subtle varieties of sounds but

*One interesting comment made in an 1821 letter to Judge Story of Salem from Sir William Scott follows: "If every man has a right to coin words, great corruption must follow, such a right ripening into a habit." Quoted in Mary Orne Pickering 1887.

could approximate them. This undertaking he refers to as the Phonology of Language, but says that he is not ready to attempt such an undertaking, but will at least provide a phonology of English. This he does using a new alphabet with such interesting names for the letters as aulif, arpeth, airish, azim, elim, oreb, and oomin for the seven vowels. While this essay is certainly interesting and does show some real insight along with some difficulties, it seems that the effect of this essay was not very great, either at the time or later. It remained an interesting sidelight, whose perhaps sole effect was to begin the friendship of DuPonceau and Pickering.

The study of Classical languages was Pickering's first love, and it remained an interest to him throughout his life, though more of his time was spent in American Indian languages after 1826. It was in Greek and Hebrew that he was offered chairs at Harvard, and he corresponded extensively with contacts in Europe on such subjects as the Pronunciation of Greek. In 1818 he published an essay on the pronunciation of Greek, following the Reuchlinian pronunciation, that is to say calling for Classical Greek to be pronounced as Modern Greek is. This memoir attracted a great deal of attention, with Professor Nathaniel Moore of Columbia College writing a pamphlet against it, and then retracting many of his criticisms, and such diverse people as Professor Brazer of Harvard and John Adams writing to Pickering in favor of his memoir, and Thomas Jefferson

writing to others in Pickering's defense. Pickering also labored for a number of years on his Comprehensive Dictionary of the Greek Language before publishing it in 1826. This Dictionary was very well received and popular, being printed in three editions (in 1826, 1829, and 1846, revised each time), as well as being printed in Edinburgh. In addition it was said to be "liberally used with slender acknowledgements, in the preparation of similar works " in Europe (Edgerton 1943, 27). As a classical scholar, Pickering certainly seems to have been influential in his times, though by the time of his death a better dictionary (Liddell and Scott) had appeared.

In terms of their work in general linguistics, there are not that many general works published by DuPonceau and Pickering. Their interest was specific and they preferred to avoid to general statements. A typical statement in this regard can be found in DuPonceau's 1819 Correspondence with Heckewalder (DuPonceau 1819, 399) "Facts ought to be collected and observations multiplied long before we venture to indulge in theoretical inferences; for unobserved facts often seem to lie in ambush, to start up at once in the face of fine spun theories, and put philosophers in the wrong." Nevertheless it is clear that out of various of their writings some discussion was made of general linguistic topics. Also clearly DuPonceau's 1825 essay on differences between spoken and written language which he wrote to try

for the Prix Volney and his 1838 essay on the nature of the Chinese writing system did deal with more general topics.

The most broad discussion of linguistics can be found in DuPonceau's 1825 essay *. In this essay he states that Philology is divided into three main divisions: "phonology, the study of speech sounds and their graphic representation, which should lead to a universal phonetic alphabet; etymology, the mainly historical comparison of word forms, by which the affinities of languages may be established: and ideology, which embraces 'dans sa vaste étendue' the various forms, structures, and systems of languages and the means whereby they differently group and expound the ideas of the human mind. This may lead to a universal grammar, showing all the different combinations of ideas that human language can achieve." (Robins 1987, 437-438). Interesting though this essay may be, however, we should keep in mind that it was not published at the time and still remains so. We can not talk of his essay having any great impact on the linguistic theories of his time. Some of his ideas were published elsewhere and did have a significant effect. In particular, his notion that what matters in establishing the affinities of languages is merely the comparison of word forms did have quite a significant impact on the historical study of languages, at least in the study of American Indian languages, where his paradigm of looking only at the lexicon when establishing language affinities was the dominant

* For this discussion of DuPonceau's as yet unpublished 1825 Essay I have relied on the discussion of it in Robins 1987.

paradigm until Brinton or Sapir (Haas 1969 B). To at least some extent, DuPonceau can not be seen as outside the stream of American linguistics in this regard, his work was followed by others who were professional linguists, yet who cited him as a major influence on their approach to the study of American Indian language families, and who clearly followed his line of work.

His essay on the writing system of Chinese does not fall into the category of work that had much of an impact however. While it is insightful and interesting, and his ideas are now agreed upon by modern scholars, he does not seem to have made any real impact on the study of writing systems, or on the study of Chinese.

Of more interest are some of the general terms that DuPonceau and Pickering either introduced or popularized. As mentioned earlier, DuPonceau introduced the term "polysynthetic" to language typology when in his 1819 "Report ..." he claimed that all of the American Indian languages from Greenland to Cape Horn were polysynthetic and that this "distinguishes the languages of the aborigines of this country from all other idioms of the known world." (DuPonceau 1819, xiv).He described polysynthesis as a construction in which "the greatest number of ideas are comprised in the least number of words" (DuPonceau 1819, xiv) and he lists two principal ways in which polysynthesis occurs. It is certainly clear that von Humboldt's adoption of this term was essential to its acceptance, but it seems

clear that some credit is due DuPonceau. Similarly Pickering is credited by Haas (in 1969 A, 2-3) with clarifying and popularizing the use of the terms exclusive and inclusive in referring to plurals.

Perhaps the greatest influences that DuPonceau and Pickering had on the general course of Linguistics can be found in their correspondence with European scholars of language, and in particular their correspondence with Wilhelm von Humboldt. In particular they provided a good amount of material on American Indian languages.

One final general contribution should be mentioned, and that is their general high regard for aboriginal languages and their almost modern attitude towards "primitive" languages. In 1819 DuPonceau observed that "I do not therefore, see as yet, that there is a necessary connexion between the greater or lesser degree of civilisation of a people, and the organization of their language. These general inferences ought to be guarded against; they are the most fruitful source of error in the moral as well as in the natural sciences." (DuPonceau 1819, 418).

It is in the area of American Indian language studies that DuPonceau and Pickering have made their most significant and long-lasting contributions, and it is here that they have certainly been most recognized. As I mentioned earlier, this recognition has at least in some cases been primarily for their work of republishing earlier manuscripts, and not so much for their own works. This is I

believe a mistake, for their own works were highly significant, both in terms of the general understanding of American Indian languages at the time and for their effect on later generations of American Indian language scholars.

We should not pass over the importance of their work in saving valuable early documents on the American Indian languages. Without their work we may well not have had access to many of the earliest analyses of some Eastern Algonquian languages which are now extinct. Among the works that they republished (or published for the first time) was Roger Williams Vocabulary of Narragansett, John Eliot's Grammar of Massachusett, Dr. Edwards Observations on the Mohegan Languages, Josiah Cotton's Vocabulary of Massachusett, Sebastien Rasles Dictionary of Abnaki, and John Heckewalder's work on the Delaware (Lenape) Indians.

With each of these republications they included often quite lengthy and important introductions, which discussed often quite general topics, such as the number of stocks of Indian languages in North America, as well as discussing the works themselves. Sometimes these discussions seem to be misguided, for example there is a lengthy discussion of whether or not there is a verb "be" in Massachusett that J. Hammond Trumbull (1869 B) found to be quite misguided. At other times these discussions seem very insightful, for example Pickering comments quite insightfully on what has been termed the "Roger Williams" sound shift in Algonquian, even going so far as to state that "An attention to these

established differences is indispensable to a just comparison of the various dialects, and the useful application of such comparisons [is indispensable] to the purposes of philology; and it will enable us to detect affinities, where at first view there may be little or no appearance of any resemblance..." (Pickering 1833, 571, quoted in Haas 1967, 817). His comments, however insightful, seem not to have been carried out whatsoever, thus limiting their usefulness in our regard.

While DuPonceau and Pickering did not do much field work at all with American Indian languages they did clearly consider themselves to be some type of fieldworkers. Thus for example in a letter to DuPonceau in 1821 Pickering says "How shameful it is, that while others are rambling among the thorns and briers of the Indian thickets in search of facts, those lazy fellows [certain philosophers of language] should loll in their armchairs and cut out an Indian language or Indian manners, according to their own pattern, with as little hesitation or doubt as if they had explored everything themselves! I am tired of such reveries, and I hope that what you have done will dispel these dreams." (Quoted in Mary Orne Pickering 1887, 311). Pickering did work extensively on his own Cherokee Grammar using a Cherokee speaker for an informant, and was quite advanced in this work when Sequoyah developed the Cherokee alphabet, and Pickering abandoned his work after 48 pages of the Grammar had already been printed. Both men often wrote general

discussions summarizing what they had read elsewhere, and they did correspond greatly in regards to American Indian languages, often acting as some sort of middlemen between field workers and linguists in Europe.

They did also write a number of general works on American Indian languages. The most extensive of these was DuPonceau's 1838 Prix Volney winning Essay (1838 A). Much of this is a restatement of his earlier 1819 "Report ...", with an extensive added comparative vocabulary. Pickering's 1831 articles on Indians and Indian Languages in the Encyclopedia Americana (Pickering 1836 (1831)) are very similar to these works. The most significant part of these works are the claims that they there and elsewhere advanced regarding the number of stocks of Indian languages (4 east of the Mississippi) and the fact that the lexicon was the basis for distinguishing these stocks, since they believed that all of the American Indian languages were polysynthetic grammatically. I have already discussed the extent to which this method of grouping languages in families was followed in the United States and in the study of American Indian languages. Their other major claim that there were four major stocks, was less followed by later researchers, and clearly they may have been to some degree correct, but they were over-simplifying the situation east of the Mississippi (and were of course unable to forecast anything about the situation west of the Mississippi).

The last major work dealing with the American Indian languages is Pickering's 1821 call for the adoption of a uniform orthography (Pickering 1821). The motive for this orthography was highly practical, and it has been rightly described by Edgerton as "nothing more nor less than a start towards an international phonetic alphabet." (Edgerton 1943, 27). This alphabet was adopted by Missionary societies, and was also used in developing an orthography for Hawaiian (Wise and Hervey 1952). In general this Orthography was influential in these sorts of practical circles, but as far as having any impact on the study of languages its effect was not very great.

In conclusion then what can we say regarding the linguistic work of Peter Stephen DuPonceau and James Pickering and their place in the history of American Linguistics? It seems clear that in spite of their undoubted status as amateurs and their not having been that involved in any sort of field work with American Indian languages, they still made some significant contributions to the general state of language studies in their time and to the general intellectual climate of their time. Pickering's work in Greek and on the state of English in America were very influential, as were their general studies of American Indian languages. As far as their effect on later generations of scholars, it is clear that it is in the area of American Indian languages that they have had the most lasting impact. Certainly this impact can be seen in their

collection and republication of manuscripts, but perhaps of greater significance was their influence on later scholars of American Indian languages in typology and the grouping of languages into families. It is in this light, then, that I claim that we can not see them as being outside the mainstream of American linguistics, but we must see them as very important figures, who to some extent shaped the course of American linguistics for quite a period of time.

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